

The Kansas school-age population has been declining and likely will continue to do so.

According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the total Kansas population increased from 2.86 million in 2010 to 2.94 million in 2023, an increase of 2.4 percent. But the population under age 18 declined over this period, from 729,088 to 691,024, a loss of over 38,000 or 5.2 percent.

The steepest decline has been children under age five, from 205,860 to 176,433, or 14.3 percent. This would indicate that the number of children reaching school-age and entering the system will be considerably lower than the number of children exiting the system through graduation. Even so, public schools are enrolling more children below age five for special education and at-risk preschool programs, and some other preschool or day care programs.

The traditional “school-age” population of 5-17 year-olds also declined, but not as much as the under age 5 group. The under age 5 group dropped from 523,228 in 2010 to 514,591 in 2023, or 1.7 percent.

It is important to note that the population counts are estimates since the Census does not occur every year. These estimates have a margin of error so the actual number may be higher or lower, and the estimates can fluctuate from year to year.

But the long-term trends are clear: the Kansas school-age population has been declining and because the youngest age group has declined the most, the decline at higher ages will likely continue.

The Kansas population is aging. The percentage of residents under age 18 dropped from 25.5 to 23.5 percent since 2010. This means both fewer potential students and a smaller share of the population is directly connected to the school system.

The pandemic seems to have accelerated the loss. Both school-aged and younger populations were declining before the pandemic struck in the Spring of 2020. However about half of the under age 5 loss and almost two-thirds of the age 5-17 loss occurred between 2020 and 2023.

With the number of children in Kansas declining, how has school enrollment changed?

Public school enrollment has declined less than the overall student population decline since 2010.

From 2010 to 2019 total public school enrollment was slowly increasing, from 481,467 in the 2010-11 school year to 492,102 in 2019-20. This was an increase of 10,635 students or 2.2 percent. When the pandemic struck in 2020 public school enrollment experienced the largest single year decline in at least 30 years. This was a drop of a nearly 16,000 students or 3.2 percent.

Public school enrollment increased by over 7,600 students following that decline until this year when a 5,000 student decline was posted. Total public enrollment is now reaching a number not seen since the 2009-2010 school year.

However, since 2010, the estimated public enrollment decline of 2,600 students (0.8 percent) is less than the estimated school-age population decline of over 8,600 (1.7 percent). Public schools are retaining more of the students who are part of the declining student-age population.

Enrollment in accredited private schools has declined more than public schools.

Only private schools which choose to be accredited by the Kansas State Department of Education report enrollment numbers. Non-accredited private schools, which include home schools, are required to register with KSDE but are not held accountable for enrollment data.

With a few exceptions, most accredited private schools are part the state's four Catholic Dioceses systems and the Lutheran school system. Accredited private enrollment peaked over 20 years ago at 31,877 in the fall of 2000, which was 6.6 percent of public enrollment (469,205) that year. But while public enrollment rose to over 492,000 over the next 19 years, private accredited school enrollment declined to 26,449 in 2019-20, a 17 percent reduction, and fell to 5.4 percent of public enrollment.

In 2021, the first year after COVID, accredited private school enrollment fell sharply by 2.5 percent. Private school enrollment has fluctuated since then and this year is 26,395, or 0.2 percent below pre-COVID.

In 2015, the state began a program that gives a state income tax credit for contributions to provide scholarships to certain low-income students in public schools who wish to transfer to accredited private schools. The most recent data is from 2022-23, when KSDE reports that 1,162 students received such awards. That equals 4.4 percent of last year's accredited private school enrollment of 26,470.

While it is unknown how many of those students would have attended private schools without this assistance and how many would have continued to attend public schools, the number of scholarships awarded equals only 8.3 percent of the total decline of public enrollment since 2015. These scholarships may have contributed to the loss of public school students but these students are less than 10 percent of the total decline.

If private accredited schools did not count the students receiving state funding in their enrollment, that total number would drop to 25,308, which would be the lowest enrollment for those schools since at least 1993.

Non-accredited and home school enrollment appeared to increase as a share of the school-aged population after COVID but has since declined.

The number of students attending private schools not accredited by the state, including home schools, or not attending any school, is not reported. An estimation of this number can be made by subtracting public and accredited private school enrollment from the estimated school-age population. It should be noted that adjustments in the calculations are necessary since public schools serve children who fall in groups outside the age 5-17 range.

Going back to 2010-11, public school enrollment was 88.2 percent of the school-aged population and accredited private schools had 5.6 percent after adjustments. This means approximately 6.2 percent of 5-17-year-olds could be attending non-accredited private schools, including home schools, or not attending any school. As public enrollment increased, its share of the school-aged population reached 90.8 percent in 2019-20, while private accredited enrollment fell to 5.1 percent and all others to about 4.0 percent.

As a result of the pandemic in 2021, public enrollment dropped to 88.9 percent of the school-aged population, accredited private schools dropped to 5.0 percent, and all others increased from about 4.0 to 6.1 percent.

For the current 2023-24 school year, public school enrollment is 88.8 percent of the school-aged population. That percentage is higher than in 2011. Accredited private enrollment is only 5.1 percent (compared to 5.6 percent in 2011). The remaining children which includes homeschooled, non-accredited private schools, or those not attending, totals just 6.1 percent. This is slightly lower than in 2010-11.

Despite declining enrollment, the percentage of higher need, high-cost students continues to increase.

There has been an increase in the number of low-income students and students with disabilities. Public schools continue to educate the bulk of these students. This year, 49.1 percent of public school students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, up from 31.9 percent in 2000. In accredited private schools, that percentage is less than half.

This year, 16.8 percent of public school students qualified for special education services due to disability, up from 6.9 percent in 2000 and the highest rate ever. Private schools also saw a rise in numbers but students in those private schools who qualify for special education receive these services from public school districts.

Notes: Kansas population data is from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey report, using 5-year estimates. These are for calendar years. When comparing to school years, population year is compared to enrollment in the fall of the school year, when enrollment is reported for Sept. 20. Therefore, Census Data for 2023 is compared to the enrollment data for the fall of 2023, which is the 2023-24 school years.

KSDE reports only headcount total enrollment for districts and systems. Grade level enrollment is "suppressed" for privacy purposes in any grade with fewer than 10 students and reported as <10. To develop an estimate for statewide enrollment in grades K-12, all grades reported as "less than 10 students" in a district were counted as 5 students.